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ABSTRACT

Research in the field of political communication has traditionally reflected a behavioral approach which has focused largely on the influence of mass communication on the public's political behavior. The role of the individual in selecting, interpreting, and processing political information has received significantly less attention. The descriptive survey and experimental data of the behaviorist paradigm can describe some correlations within the range of all political behavior, but behaviorism has not explained the individual as a single processor of information. In the future, research theory in political communication should be directed toward a phenomenological or functional approach in which man is perceived as an active rather than a passive agent. Whereas the behavioral approach describes how individuals are affected by their environment, a phenomenological methodology attempts to investigate and explain how individuals react to their environment and why particular attributes of individuals are related to communication behavior patterns. (EE)

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CAMPAIGN '76: WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

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The assessment of where we are and the articulation of research priorities identifying where we wish to go become increasingly important as the study of political communication grows more prolific, diffuse, and sometimes dilletantish. This paper considers where we are in our understanding of political communication, how we got here, and in what direction we may most productively proceed.

Our ultimate goal is to formulate a comprehensive theory of political persuasion which would allow us to confidently assess the influence of political communication on election outcomes and frame general principles describing how communication may be used for maximum political impact. Before we may directly address that goal, however, we must first come to better understand the role of political communication in the process through which individuals perceive, judge, or "understand" their political environment and, on the basis of such understanding, act toward that environment. Attainment of this short-range goal is critical because any theory of political persuasion is necessarily premised on some explanation of perceptual processes by which individuals interpret or create meaning for information.

At this point we are far from realizing even the short-range goal. We know more about political behavior <u>per se</u> than we know about the impact of communication on that behavior. Yet our knowledge--defined as explanatory theory--of political behavior is less than impressive. A research tradition spanning more than three decades has identified an array of demographic, sociological, and attitudinal or mediational correlates of voting behavior. As a result we know, for example, what income groups, educational attainment levels, ethnic group identifications, and secondary

group memberships correlate highly with what sorts of partisan voting patterns. This knowledge is of limited use to the student of political communication, however, because it is descriptive rather than explanatory; we do not know why these correlations exist.

Mediational views of political behavior are an attempt to explain, at least in part, demographic and socioeconomic correlates of voting. This research tradition has identified certain partisan and non-partisan attitudes and beliefs which are assumed to be the perceptual consequences of sociological attributes. Demographic characteristics, for example, are assumed to lead one to acquire certain attitudes which, in turn, predispose one to vote in a certain way. This knowledge is of greater interest to the political persuasion scholar because most theories of persuasion with which he seeks to understand campaign communication are based on assumptions about mediational processes, assumptions typically concerning attitudes and their structure. The correlational evidence to suggest a relationship between attitudes and political behavior is fairly strong; again the descriptive evidence is stronger than the explanatory evidence, however. The existence of the mediational processes which are commonly offered to explain why attitude/behavior relations occur has not been validated.

The widely accepted selective exposure hypotheses concerning attention to political communication illustrate well our inability to explain behavior by reference to mediational processes. "Selective exposure" is a group of hypotheses which are based on the assumption that political partisanship is a motivationally dynamic force which influences political information seeking. These hypotheses predict chiefly that individuals who feel a

strong identification with a political party will (1) voluntarily expose themselves to more political information in the mass media than individuals who do not, and will (2) expose themselves disproportionately to information which favors their political preference by actively seeking such information (McCombs, 1972: 174-175; Weiss, 1969: 87-89, 156-160). Evidence of a relationship between partisanship and volume and bias of exposure to political communication has often been found in survey research (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954). Despite the fact that these findings have not normally been subjected to tests of statistical inference and are far from unequivocal in their support for the hypotheses, Flanigan (1972) reflects most current thinking about the hypotheses in his claim that selective exposure is "the most important generalization about media attention" that social scientists have formulated concerning political communication (p. 113).

In recent years, critical scrutiny of the motivationally dynamic assumptions undergirding the selectivity hypotheses has shown the paucity of evidence which actually supports those assumptions (Sears, 1968; Sears and Freedman, 1967; Freedman and Sears, 1965; Steiner, 1962). Not only does negative evidence of selectivity as a function of partisan attitudes exist, but a number of studies have offered plausible explanations of political information seeking that make no assumptions about attitudes whatsoever (McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Atkin, 1972). Defender of the hypotheses Katz (1968) has concluded: "Reexamination of the evidence in the wake of . . . objections . . . reveals how little evidence is required for an hypothesis to be accepted as 'proven'" (p. 795).

As a result, we are hard pressed at present to speak of political behavior in explanatory rather than descriptive terms. Failure to derive satisfactory explanation is a significant obstacle which must be overcome before the more conventional questions that intrigue the communication scholar may be productively and responsibly investigated. Studies of the relative effectiveness of issue versus image materials, of the differential credibility of partisan versus non-partisan information sources, and of the influence of various channels of political communication, for example, seem premature until the theoretical assumptions about information processing which lead us to pursue these questions are found to be explanatory with respect to political behavior. We simply do not now know whether the discriminations we find in survey and experimental data reflect meaningful judgments made by voters or are artifacts of our methods.

We have arrived at this state of affairs because of the presuppositions which have characterized our research. The study of mass communication generally and of political communication specifically has been preoccupied with investigating communication effects. In conceptualizing those effects it has assumed, as has most persuasion research, an essentially behaviorists position in which men are seen as acted upon or reactive to stimulation from their environment. This position creates a dual interest in effects as "motion," sequential temporal movement to a "place" such as voting for candidate X, and in properties of stimuli which are assumed to be likely "causes" of "motion," such as image-oriented television commercials. The same interest in correlating "movement" with its "causes" undergirds the sociological and mediational study of political behavior.

The difficulties which inhere in the attempt to study political communication from this position are substantial. Philosophically the most striking shortcoming of this position is its denial of the contemporary notion of "process" which we assume is essential to understanding communication and human action. A more practical matter is the locus of research interest in stimuli, e.g., information, and in motion, e.g., voting, which does not allow direct investigation of voters' perceptual processing of information, a shortcoming Smith (1972) has noted in attitude change research generally. Additionally, the inherently reductionist view of "causes" and "effects" which this position requires seems ill-suited to the long-lived, multi-media, multi-message environment of a political campaign.

The bases of political behavior and of interpreting political information are but little understood, then, because our presuppositions and consequent methods have not led us to ask the most useful research questions. How we may most productively proceed in the future is a question to which my answer must be less certain. Clearly, our first priority must be a richer understanding of political information processing and its relationship to political behavior.

Since the behaviorist position is ill equipped for enriching this understanding, it may be useful to consider an alternative conceptualization. What is commonly known as the "uses and gratifications" or "functional" approach to mass communication research is gaining support as an alternative to the effects orientation (Weiss, 1969; McCombs, 1972). This approach is an application to mass communication of postulates drawn from symbolic interactionism and such derivitives as "constructive alternativism"

(Kelly, 1955). These postulates may be summarized as follows:

(1) Man is an active agent rather than a passive re-actor vis-a-vis his world;

(2) In order to act confidently, man strives to "understand" his environment by ordering his perceptions in such a way as to "make sense" out of his world;

(3) The attempt to "make sense" out of the world causes each man to develop a cognitive map or set of dimensions in terms of which he perceives his environment;

(4) Man thus acts <u>on</u> information by perceiving it in terms of his cognitive map or set of perceptual dimensions which allow him to create "meaning."

These assumptions, which are in sharp contrast to the behaviorist model, suggest the merit of studying communication from a phenomenological viewpoint as outlined by McCombs (1972):

> Rather than asking what mass communication does to people, we instead ask about what people do with mass communication. Descriptively, this is a more realistic depiction of mass communication where a plethora of messages abound, but only a relative few are selected by any individual. At the level of explanation, it suggests asking <u>why</u> certain attributes of individuals, such as the traditional locator variables level of education and sex, are related to communication behavior patterns (pp. 185-186).

Investigations of the relative effectiveness of image versus issue material illustrate important differences between the behaviorist and phenomenological positions. Since the content of these categories of messages seems to be markedly different, the behaviorist assumes that properties of the stimuli are likely to "cause" different "effects" on voters. Theoretically, this assumption leads to the prediction that one kind of message may be more "effective" for certain kinds of voters because

they distinguish between issue messages and image messages and prefer one type of stimulus (Wyckoff, 1968; Nimmo, 1970). Methodologically, researchers ask voters to rank order the relative importance to their voting decision of candidates' personalities, campaign issues, and so on in order to validate the causal nature of stimulus characteristics (Survey Research Center, 1968; American Institute for Political Communication, 1970). What is not directly considered is whether voters actually discriminate between issue and image messages and evaluate them differently because of their issue or image content rather than because of some other reason. A phenomenological approach to this question would seek first to identify the kinds of distinctions voters make in processing and interpreting political information. Asking this prior question would make it possible to discover whether the image/issue distinction is a spurious one because it is not a dimension on which large numbers of voters judge information. If the distinction is found to be a dimension of judgment used by voters, then we may have greater confidence in the stimulus properties as an explanation of responses than the behaviorist method permits. It is the greater ability of the phenomenological approach to provide explanatory generalizations that recommends it to the study of political communication.

The related concepts of need for orientation (McCombs and Weaver, 1973) and communicatory utility (Atkin, 1972) suggest one application of the phenomenological position to the study of political communication. These concepts hypothesize that people attend to information to become oriented to their environment or understand it more completely and to acquire knowledge which may be used as currency in discussions with others. The

two-dimensional theory of political information utility which results from the combination of these two concepts emphasizes the active nature of information scanning and processing and the divergent functions or uses which information may serve for various perceivers. Research based on this theory would ask directly how people use information and would avoid a major problem of behaviorist research, its assumption that "the existence of a correlation between exposure to similarly labeled media content . . . [signifies] that they serve the same psychological function" (Weiss, 1969: 84). Further analysis of survey data collected at the University of Illinois (Swanson, 1973) has suggested that the information utility theory may provide more useful explanations and predictors of information acquisition and selectivity than such traditional variables as political partisanship.

Other methods of studying information processing more directly include an application to political communication of the methodologies associated with the study of interpersonal perception. These methods typically begin by eliciting perceptual constructs or judgmental dimensions from subjects in order to derive a perceptual map or structure rather than by asking the subject to judge the salience of a group of pre-determined stimulus-based attributes (Kelly, 1955; Bannister and Mair, 1968). Gordon (1971) has suggested ways these methods might be extended to the direct study of mass media information processing.

Fundamentally this paper is a call for genuine pluralism in political communication research, a pluralism which includes research and theory not based on the behaviorist paradigm. Investigations based on a functional

or phenomenological position seem to offer a promising way of generating data on which explanatory theory may be erected. Such research can not only make important progress in enriching our understanding of political communication, but may also produce results which have significant implications for the study of communication and persuasion generally.

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